**September 24, 2017**

**Matthew 20:1-15**

From our Protestant middle class American background, we probably heard today’s parable from the mindset of the hard worker, the early riser. We agree that they should be paid differently from those who came later. The first should probably be paid *more* because they worked longer hours. It doesn’t make sense that those folks who showed up late were paid the same… It ain’t right. It’s not fair.

But what if we’re not where we think we are in line? What if we weren’t the workaholics who showed up early that morning? What if our babysitter was late, we missed our bus connection, had to walk an extra mile, and when we finally showed up, were hired last? We were so grateful to work at all – even that last hour. It’s not fair. It’s *generosity* beyond our wildest dreams. Grace regardless of our ability or social status or household income. As Barbara Brown Taylor wrote, “Depending on where you are in line, that can sound like powerful good news, because if God is not fair, then there is a chance we will get paid *more* than we are worth, that we will get more than we deserve, that we will make it through the doors even though we are last in line–not because of who we are but because of who God is.”

This story isn’t about us. This story is about who God is.

The landowner asked the laborers, “Are you envious because I am generous?” It’s a rhetorical question; thus, the answer is yes. “Are you envious because I, the Lord, am generous?” Yes. Yes, we are envious because God is generous. If God’s generosity is directed towards me, then all is well with the world. But if God’s generosity is directed towards others (especially those who don’t “deserve” God’s generosity), then we are downright green with envy, and quick to shout, “but what about *me*? I could use more of God’s generosity.”

As we see God’s generosity extended to creation, and as we reach to keep that generosity to ourselves, it seems that we want to restrict God’s goodness to the world. Even though we have enough, when we see that there is more to be had, we want that *more*. We are envious when God’s attention seems to be directed elsewhere, so we become the older children who work harder to prove our worth and earn “attaboy”s. And we become the youngest children who scramble and clown around, desperately trying to get any attention at all.

It’s not about us. In this parable, in the Bible, in creation. It’s not about us. On so many levels. Whereas our inclination is to focus on our own needs and our individual life, the biblical story of the Triune God is one of community. Man was not created to be alone in the garden; we were created to be together – with one another and with God. Cain and Able were meant to be supportive family. The tribes of Israel were meant to stay one nation. And the disciples were meant to be a united band of brothers. Yet they all fell into competition, pushing the rest into a heap, scrambling over the others to the top.

If only the disciples remembered those first days together, when Jesus commanded them to leave everything behind. They left their identities as fishermen and brothers and local fellas. They became “the disciples,” known as the strangers-passing-through, devotees of the strange Rabbi, and helpers to those who were disregarded by society. Their individual identities became less important than their communal identity. Then Jesus taught them to pray, “Give us this day our daily bread.” Give us, give this community, just what we need, only what sustains, nothing that will spoil.

And yet, like the disciples, we often find ourselves praying, “Give me this day my daily bread.” Everything is ok as long as we have breakfast, we have clean water, we have work and a bank account and a friend. Nevermind those people in Puerto Rico who are without power and diminishing supplies, days and weeks after storms. Nevermind those refugees who lost everything in the Syrian Civil War. Nevermind our neighbors up the street whose twin sons drowned earlier this summer. We forget about them. We forget to pray for them and work for them and help them. If we are grieving, we pray. If we are hungry, we pray. But as soon as God’s generosity grows to abundance for *us*, we forget about *the rest of them*. We forget that “them” is us. To pray for them is to pray for us.

“Are we envious because God is generous?” Yes, we are envious because God is generous. Our response shows not just that we move from a communal mindset to an individual one, but we actually place ourselves into a hierarchy. We start ranking people – from deserving to unworthy. From hardworking to lazy. And we are never at the bottom, but somehow, neither are we at the top. When we admit our envy, we admit that we believe someone got what they didn’t deserve. Someone less than us got something we should get. And, when we admit our envy, we also admit that we believe someone else got something we would like. So we are better than Hitler, but worse than Martin Luther King, Jr. Better than a convicted felon, but worse than the innocent newborn. And in our warped understanding of justice, we would apportion generosity differently from how God graciously distributes.

So then our response to the question also shows our desire to conform God’s justice to our own. Whereas we give people their just reward – stickers for the well behaved, prison for the criminals, and healthcare for those who can afford it – God’s justice sets the prisoner free. God’s justice brings strength to the weak and sight to the blind. God tends to the hungry and the oppressed, the stranger, the widow and the orphan. God cares for the lonely, the grieving, the fearful, and lost. God is a generous God. God cares for all of his good creation.

Yes, we are envious because God is generous. But are we envious because those others are getting more of God, or more of what God gives?

God may be generous with material goods like money and immaterial things like health, but God is especially generous in more meaningful ways. God is generous in giving us life and breath. God is generous in bringing our salvation. Throughout the book of Romans we have seen God’s grace and generosity shared through salvation. We have eternal life because the Triune God was generous enough to send Jesus to die to save us. God saved us from being homeless, hungry wanderers, and gave us a home (through Christ’s Church), a family (through baptism), nourishment (through Communion and the Word), and a purpose (in serving him). Not just “us” Presbyterians, but “us” Christians, “us” creation named “good”. God is generous in making room for all of us. Salvation is salvation. There is no first or last. There is only saved. There is only loved and forgiven and claimed. God gives the same salvation to those early birds and Johnny-come-lately.

This week, notice the ways that you are envious. Notice the people of whom you are envious. Notice the things in which you place your envy. And let that be your prayer. Turn to God, admitting your envy, praying for those people, and acknowledging those people and situations whom we overlook and forget.

One of the Reformers, George MacDonald, said, “My prayers, my God, flow from what I am not; I think thy answers make me what I am… if the lion in us pray – thou answers with the lamb.” May we find our prayers and ourselves reformed by God’s generosity, and in God’s grace. Amen.